The Anthem Companion to C. Wright Mills
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Introduction

AMERICAN FAUST

Guy Oakes

Whatever is the lot of humankind
I want to taste within my deepest self.
I want to seize the highest and the lowest,
To load its woe and bliss upon my breast,
And thus expand my single self titanically
And in the end go down with all the rest.


C. Wright Mills was born in Waco, Texas, on August 28, 1916. In the 1940s the governor of Texas observed that the frontiersmen who settled the wilderness that became Texas carried an ax, a rifle and a Bible (Powers 2015, 29). When Mills became an Ivy League professor and a New York intellectual, he was not averse to embellishing his Wild West provenance, solidifying his image of the intellectual who wrote by riding and shooting. Playing the part of the outlander, he kept his distance from the pretensions of the Claremont Avenue set and the cultural refinements of Morningside Heights in the neighborhood of Columbia University, where he taught in the undergraduate college. Mills seems to have believed that he forged in the smithy of his soul – if not the uncreated conscience of his race, then at least his own identity – creating himself ex nihilo. In fact, he received an excellent education at the University of Texas, especially in philosophy with George Gentry and David Miller. Both had doctorates from the University of Chicago, where they had studied with George Herbert Mead. Mills studied economics with Clarence Ayres, another Chicago doctorate in philosophy who taught institutional economics. Compared to contemporary graduate education in Anglophone sociology – where training in philosophy and economics ranges from primitive to nonexistent outside the subdisciplines of economic sociology and what is loosely called methodology – Mills’s education was remarkably comprehensive and
thorough. Yet he devoted much of his career to puncturing the mythologies, illusions and self-deceptions of his contemporaries.

Autobiographical fictionalizations aside, Mills was a protean and endlessly restless thinker. In a breathless career of some twenty years, he wrote on issues of remarkable breadth: from the sociology of knowledge and the philosophy of the social sciences to the theory of social stratification and the reconfiguration of the US middle classes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the concentration of political and economic power in his time, the collapse of liberalism in the United States and the relentless bureaucratization and militarization of US society, the commercial debasement of the media and the translation of power as culture, the politics of the Cold War and prospects for democratization and economic progress in developing states. This is not an exhaustive list. Beginning in the early 1950s, he succeeded in his ambition of writing social science for the public, publishing articles in newspapers and magazines as well as writing books that would now be regarded as anomalies: sociological bestsellers that were also taken seriously by academics. Moreover, he attempted, with mixed results, to write social science as imaginative literature – “sociological poetry,” as he called it, finding perhaps deeper truths and more telling insights in novels than in sociological surveys and casting doubt on the dichotomy of fictional and nonfictional prose. Thus he drew on an uncommon range of writers: not only the usual suspects for a sociologist of the Left – Karl Marx, Max Weber, Karl Mannheim, the American pragmatists and the thinkers of the Frankfurt School – but also Honoré de Balzac, John Dos Passos and James Agee. The conception of the nonfictional novel later realized in Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* and Norman Mailer’s *The Executioner’s Song* was anticipated, if not executed with great finesse, in Mills’s first important solo work, *White Collar*. His career in the 1950s intersected with the development of intercontinental, commercial jet airline travel. As his work gained currency, he became an intellectual celebrity and an academic conference animal, and, as Verónica Montecinos puts it in her essay that follows, “a belated cosmopolitan” – traveling and lecturing not only in the United States but also Latin America, Cuba, Britain, eastern and western Europe and the Soviet Union.

Mills was a man of large appetites and strong passions – for food, physical labor, liquor, intervals of traveling at a fast pace – sometimes on his now-legendary BMW motorcycle – and success. Friendship was important. Some close relationships endured in spite of it all, as Hans Gerth, one of his oldest friends, observed. Several did not, ending as casualties of personal or ideological disputes. All the modes of work and play that Mills collected under the heading of craftsmanship were of great significance in his life: carpentry, architecture and the building of his own homes, design generally and its
relationship to politics, motor repair and photography – for which he had a gift, as his haunting photograph for the cover of *White Collar* shows. This list can also be easily extended. Ernest Hemingway wrote that only bullfighters live all the way up. Even if we suppose this is true, in the range of his energies and enthusiasms, Mills represented a reasonable if less spectacular approximation. His conception of an authentic human life recalls the vision of the young Marx, who imagined a social world that had transcended the capitalist division of labor, famously analyzed by Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations* and celebrated for its efficiencies by generations of neoclassical economists. There was, Marx thought, a more human world, where it would be possible to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, tend cattle later in the day and engage in criticism after dinner. Or, in the life that Mills not only imagined but also attempted to realize, a world where he wrote in the morning, made furniture or repaired motors in the afternoon, devoted time to the darkroom before dinner and read novels in the evening.

In these introductory remarks, I consider Mills’s conception of intellectuality and the social roles and responsibilities he ascribed to intellectuals. This position is closely linked to his ideas on sociology as radical critique, formed during the 1940s and elaborated and refined in the 1950s: two decades of professional success but also frustration as Mills struggled, ultimately without fulfillment, to locate a space for himself in academia that he regarded as commensurate with his ambitions and consistent with his principles. I close with observations on the aims and scope of this book and a sketch of the essays that follow.

There is no scholarly study of Mills’s life and work comparable to Robert Skidelsky’s three-volume work on John Maynard Keynes or Joachim Radkau’s biography of Max Weber. Until recently, much of the literature on Mills, like Mills himself, exhibited a tendency to excess. One consequence, as John H. Summers has noted, is the extreme bimodality of the reception of Mills’s writings, which exhibits “a false logic of veneration and debunking, one that took root almost immediately after his death” (Summers 2008b, 108). The polarities of the early Mills literature are perhaps most pointedly represented by Irving Louis Horowitz, the academic venture capitalist whose investment in Mills’s unpublished work leveraged his career, and Edward Shils, whose plan for an English edition of selections from Weber’s writings was forestalled by the publication of *From Max Weber* in 1946, translated and edited, as its front matter stated, by Gerth and Mills. In the year after his death, Horowitz eulogized Mills as the greatest of all US sociologists, topping off this encomium by comparing him with Socrates, Martin Luther and Marx (Horowitz 1963, 1, 5). In contrast, Shils’s review of Mills’s book *The Sociological Imagination* dismissed it as a tissue of “slipshod exhortations and denunciations” and savaged the scholarly personality and character of the author. The “solitary horseman”
favored by Mills acolytes was exposed as “in part a prophet, in part a scholar, and in part a rough-tongued brawler – a sort of Joe McCarthy of sociology, full of wild accusations and gross inaccuracies, bullying manners, harsh words, and shifting grounds” (Shils 1960, 77–8).

Although most of the old fires of anti-Mills invective have burned to embers, the market for celebratory works and refashioned memorials remains robust, with contributions by aging members of the New Left as well as work by younger scholars. With the exception of the pioneering work of Richard Gillam (1975, 1981), serious scholarship on Mills is a recent development (see especially Sawchuk 2001; Brewer 2004, 2005; Summers 2006, 2007, 2008a, 2008b; Geary 2009; Aronowitz 2012; and Treviño 2012).1

**Intellectuality**

“It is a spirit in opposition, rather than in accommodation, that grips me because the romance, the interest, the challenge of the intellectual life is to be found in dissent against the status quo at a time when the struggle on behalf of underrepresented and disadvantaged groups seems so unfairly weighted against them.” This challenge marks the intellectual as the quintessential outsider, inhabiting a self-imposed state of exile and marginality. Thus the intellectual is by necessity “a being set apart, someone able to speak the truth to power, a crusty, eloquent, fantastically courageous and angry individual for whom no worldly power is too big and imposing to be criticized and pointedly taken to task.” These lines were written not by Mills but Edward W. Said in his BBC Reith Lectures of 1993. However, they capture beautifully Mills’s sense of the intellectual ethos and ethic and in a graceful prose that he envied and emulated but never mastered. Mills, ever the critic, would have found little to contest in Said’s lectures, not least because he regarded Mills as “a fiercely independent intellectual with an impassioned social vision” and – perhaps indulging in an excess of generosity – “a remarkable capacity for communicating his ideas in a straightforward and compelling prose” (Said 1994, xvii, 8, 20).

Said maintained that the intellectual’s role has “an edge to it.” As a master of denunciation, the intellectual undermines conventional truths, dissents, accuses and contests. To the principalities and powers of this world, these efforts are, at a minimum, discomfiting. However, there are circumstances in which they can delegitimize the bases of existing orders. Then the intellectual may be regarded, not without cause, as a troublemaker, disloyal and even traitorous. “Least of all should an intellectual be there to make his/her audiences feel good: the whole point is to be embarrassing, contrary, even unpleasant.” Because “there are no rules by which an intellectual can know what to say or
do,” because intellectuals are condemned to iconoclasm, without authorities to respect, gods to serve, or heroes to celebrate, they are enemies of dogma, compromise and accommodation. They reject a world in which “all ideas are marketable, all values transmutable, all professions reduced to the pursuit of easy money and quick success” (Said 1994, xiv, 12, 19). In a phrase that Mills favored, the intellectual refuses to sell out.

Mills’s chief passion was intellectual work. Both as a professional sociologist and a thinker of large aspirations, he conceived intellectuality as a calling: an obligation to diagnose the predominant trends of his time, demonstrate how they produced structures of power that formed and deformed individual lives and explain how they might be resisted or perhaps even reversed. As Mills understood it, resistance was radical critique. Genuine intellectuality was intrinsically radical because it entailed the imperative of telling disagreeable truths about imbalances of power and sources of injustice. To write in this fashion was to uncover the facts that lie at the basis of the existing order. In Mills’s conception of radicalism, this was not only a radical act but also incendiary and not without risk to the writer. This was because the facts that mattered had been obscured and distorted by the peculiar conjunction of cunning, stupidity and corruption of the soul on the part of the masters who occupied the corridors of power. As a radical, Mills was not an activist or a man of social movements. He possessed neither the lust for power nor the pleasure in its exercise needed to lead; nor did he have the disposition to join and serve in the ranks. Millsian radicalism was a product of the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century – the radicalism of Voltaire, Denis Diderot and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart as well. To be radical was to write, or to compose, against the institutions of the time. On the European continent of the eighteenth century, these institutions were monarchical, aristocratic and clerical. In the US social order of the 1940s and 1950s, they were bureaucratic, commercial and military.

Mills drew a distinction between intellectuals and coteries of experts or professionals who work with ideas and live off them. The true constituency of the intellectual is not a professional guild or an academic discipline, but the public. As an author, Mills wrote for both professional colleagues and the public, often in the same text. Aside from embellishing his work with the ornaments of academic learning and research, his efforts to conform to the professional etiquettes of his field were not impressive. He rejected all the sociological orthodoxies of the 1950s, including the doctrine of the axiological neutrality of the social sciences and the imperative of scientific objectivity and scholarly impartiality. His work is easily recognizable as written by an academic social scientist, but after his early essays on the sociology of knowledge, published while he was still a student, he abandoned the recondite jargon of sociology.
Although not a gifted writer, one of his aims was to achieve a fluid and easily accessible style – simple and lucid but also, as he put it, “slick” – punctuated by striking phrases that simplified complexities and captured them in pithy and trenchant language. After leaving graduate school, he worked through the next 20 years to improve his writing, seeking advice from professional writers such as the freelance historian William Miller and the novelist Harvey Swados, both close friends, and his colleague Lionel Trilling, the literary scholar with whom he taught at Columbia.

Said’s choice of a text to make a case for Mills as an exemplary intellectual was an essay of 1944 that Mills had originally called “The Politics of Truth.” It was published in Dwight Macdonald’s little magazine politics as “The Powerless People: The Role of the Intellectual in Society.” By this point, there was confidence among the Allies of victory in World War II. Exercises in postwar planning and restructuring the US economy for peacetime were high on the agendas of social scientists and political writers, in and out of government. Mills argued that these efforts were either naïve or cynical. In both cases, they ignored social pathologies of the United States that had entered the war: the bureaucratization of life and the “organized irresponsibility” of huge organizations that concealed the real bases of power, diffusing accountability for decisions by a small number of political and economic elites that determined the life chances of all citizens. An institutional process of selection and exclusion had produced “universal deception” and a mentality of “fantasy or powerlessness.” Intellectuals and independent artists were equipped to “smash the stereotypes of vision and intellect with which modern communications swamp us,” but they were marginalized. Those who were willing to make the sacrifice of intellect and subject themselves to self-censorship in the interest of career promotion sold their wares and themselves on the mass market and were compensated accordingly (Mills, in Summers, ed. 2008, 19–20). Thus the powerless people of Mills’s title were authentic intellectuals, those who could not be bought. They were writers such as Mills himself, committed to a politics of truth. As he wrote in his revision of this essay, published in 1955 in Dissent as “Knowledge and Power,” the responsibility of the genuine intellectual was to maintain “an adequate definition of reality,” to “find out as much of the truth as he can, and to tell it to the right people, at the right time, and in the right way” (Mills, in Summers, ed. 2008, 134–5).

As a graduate student and a young professor at the beginning of the 1940s, Mills made the conventional moves to achieve success by following standard academic strategies and protocols. He learned the skills of career management early and employed them with confidence: publishing papers narrowly defined by the subdisciplines of the time, targeting the best journals, establishing contacts with both leading and promising academics – Robert K. Merton
was one of his earliest correspondents in the latter category – and presenting papers at meetings of the American Sociological Society, later rechristened the American Sociological Association. By the mid-1940s, when he was actively engaged in publishing articles and reviews for New York political magazines on the anti-Communist left – *Partisan Review*, the *New Republic*, the *New Leader* and *Politics* – he was shifting to other modes of defining his socioprofessional identity. The year 1944 is a useful landmark, the beginning of the refractory, tendentious and pugnacious Mills for whom analysis was so closely tied to critique that they were often difficult to distinguish. The political articles of the mid-1940s marked the direction his thought took in the 1950s, both in his more academic works such as *White Collar*, *The Power Elite* and *The Sociological Imagination*, as well as in tracts written for a larger readership, such as *The Causes of World War III* and *Listen, Yankee*, his immensely popular little book on the Cuban revolution.

Thus Said chose wisely. “The Powerless People” was the first piece in which the constitutive features of Millsian intellectuality were in place and integrated, even if somewhat inexactly, to build a single argument, the first occasion on which the style of thought that became characteristic of Mills’s work is recognizable. It was defined by two elements: an institutional analysis of the selection and formation of types of personality and character and the deployment of this mode of analysis to produce an unsparing critique of the US social order, an inflexible refusal to join his academic colleagues in celebrating a new triumphalist Pax Americana.

**Radicalism and World War II**

In Mills's conception of institutional analysis, institutions select, train and reward certain “types of mind.” This is the process of institutionalization. By virtue of institutional reward criteria and incentive mechanisms, institutions place “a premium on the development of certain mental qualities,” thereby producing answers to the following questions: “What varieties of men and women now prevail in this society and in this period? And what varieties are coming to prevail? In what ways are they selected and formed, liberated and repressed, made sensitive and blunted?” (Mills 1959, 7, 103). With a bit of homework, it is not difficult to trace the lineaments of the theoretical tradition in which this conception is embedded.

In *Economy and Society* and his studies in the comparative sociology of world religions, Weber constructed typologies of social action and actors. He based his typologies on the histories of the institutional orders and cultural spheres in which actions and actors were situated, concentrating on the economy, the polity, law, religion, science (or, more generally, intellectuality)
and art. Mannheim contributed the important idea of the rationalization of
the personality in modern institutions: the respects in which persons mold,
polish, revise and remake their identities and Weltanschauungen in response
to institutional exigencies. Gerth cut his teeth studying Weber with Mannheim
at Heidelberg and Frankfurt in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The National
Socialist revolution in Germany led to his emigration, eventually to the
University of Wisconsin in Madison in 1940. Here he pursued the mode of
analysis he learned from Weber and Mannheim, creating what was arguably
the most idiosyncratic series of lecture courses ever listed under the heading of
social psychology. Mills audited these lectures, although he was never formally
Gerth’s student, and his University of Wisconsin transcript includes no
courses with Gerth. Listening to Gerth, he learned how to become a Marxist
Weberian, if this term is allowed, or if not, a Weberian of the Left.

The question of the genesis of Mills’s radicalism is more perplexing. How
did Mills, a precocious student specializing in the marginal disciplinary areas
of the sociology of knowledge and the philosophy of social science, become
a radical thinker? Considered superficially, the question does not seem so
puzzling. Mills answered it himself. It was his experience of World War II,
or so he claimed some twelve years after the war had ended. Between 1956
and 1960, he wrote a series of introspective and self-dramatizing letters to an
imaginary Soviet colleague he called Tovarich. In one of the Tovarich letters
from 1957, he posed for his own consideration the question “What did World
War II mean to me?” He answered it “in one sentence: following it closely and
thinking about it made a radical of me” (in Mills and Mills 2000, 251). Very
late in the war, probably in March 1945, he wrote the following to his parents.
“Like I told you 3 years ago, I’ll sit this one out. It’s a goddamned bloodbath
to no end save misery and mutual death to all civilized values” (in Mills and
Mills 2000, 89, emphasis in original). In his essay on The Power Elite, Gillam
embraced Mills’s explanation without reservation: the monstrous violence and
irrationality of the war left Mills traumatized, transforming him into a radical
political thinker. “For him the war catalyzed a sudden ‘awakening’ that was
uniquely political and radical” (Gillam 1975, 465–6).

Mills’s explanation of the formation of his radicalism is implausible. The
letter to Tovarich is an ex post facto document, written more than a decade
after the war had ended and a year after Mills had published The Power Elite,
which was replete with fulminations against the increasing militarization of
US society and the networks of economic, political and military leaders who
abetted this process and benefited from it. As he was writing his parents in
March 1945, the Red Army, which had breached the border of East Prussia in
January, was invading Germany and advancing on Berlin. The war in Europe
ended in May. As Mills knew when he wrote “The Powerless People” in early
1944, plans for demobilization and transition to a peacetime economy were underway. Thus it is not clear what he thought he would sit out in 1945.

Three years earlier, in 1942, Mills was not contemplating an inner emigration from US participation in the war. On the contrary, he was mobilizing his academic connections in order to escape conscription. In the early months of US military engagement, he met Harold Lasswell, the political scientist and theoretician of propaganda, in Washington, DC. At this point, Mills anticipated quite correctly that the war would present new opportunities for enterprising intellectuals. Social scientists with his training would be needed to interpret the US role in the war for the public, explaining and justifying the conversion of the United States from the arsenal of democracy into the leader of the Western Allied forces. Influential luminaries such as Lasswell were planning the strategies and techniques of Allied propaganda analysis. They would have the authority to recruit younger social scientists into the new wartime propaganda ministries. Chances for advancement were at stake, and Mills did not want to be left out. In 1943, he was petitioning Lasswell as well as Robert Lynd at Columbia to recommend him for a special naval commission: a year of study at Columbia, a salary of $280 per month (approximately $3,800 in 2014 dollars) and exemption from combat. By early June 1943, he had received no response from the navy, and a preliminary physical examination for induction into the army convinced him to explore other possibilities. His first choice was a position in Washington, DC, with the Office of Strategic Studies (OSS), the precursor of the Central Intelligence Agency. As late as February 1944, he was convinced that Franz Neumann would find a place for him in the OSS. Neumann was a German émigré political scientist based at the Institute for Social Research in Manhattan. In 1942, Mills had written an enthusiastic review of his pioneering study of the German Nazi Party, *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism*. However, all Mills’s efforts to secure military preferment proved futile. Only his preinduction physical examination in May 1944, revealing a high level of hypertension and leading to his classification as unfit for military service, saved him from the draft (Oakes and Vidich 1999, 95).

As Andrew Grossman notes in this volume, Mills was opposed to US entry into the European war. Unlike Macdonald, he confined his opposition to private correspondence, taking no public stand. I have found no evidence for a wartime epiphany, a catalytic event that, in Gillam’s vision, transformed Mills into a radical. Nor have I found evidence that he followed the war closely or thought about it deeply. Like the antihero in Saul Bellow’s novel *Dangling Man* (1944), Mills’s serious reflections on the war seem to have revolved around the prospects for his induction. Unlike Bellow’s character, who dangled, took no measures to avoid conscription, quit his job on the assumption that it was
inevitable and eventually was drafted, Mills – never a dangling man – went into action to avoid combat. A stroke of luck saved him from this fate.

The Columbia Memorial

Until he suffered a debilitating heart attack in December 1960, Mills ignored the hypertension discovered in his preinduction physical exam. He died of a heart attack on March 20, 1962. On April 16, a memorial was held at Columbia. Gerth, who was asked to speak, flew from Madison for the event. In a letter written after the occasion, laced with witty but caustic observations, it was clear that he believed the Columbia homage, conceived as a formal interactional ritual, did not reach the highest standards. Mills’s departmental colleagues were notable for their absence. “Mr. Robert King Merton was ‘out of town’ and prevented from being there. Mr. Lazarsfeld was indisposed. The absence of his colleagues was somewhat ‘dysfunctional’ to the image of the Columbia faculty in the eyes of an outsider such as myself, who did not mind to fly in from 1000 distance and be back to teach my classes on time” (Oakes and Vidich 1999, 141; emphasis in original). In his eulogy, Gerth celebrated Mills’s passion for ideas by comparing him to Henri de Saint-Simon, the intellectual adventurer of the Napoleonic era. Mills was the first homegrown sociologist to tackle the big questions concerning the genesis and destiny of the American experience and the distinctiveness of the American identity. In this respect, he was the legitimate heir of Alexis de Tocqueville and James Bryce, a tradition of distinguished writers who interpreted US society for a world public (Oakes and Vidich 1999, 141). Mills “packed several lives into one,” creating “an open ended ‘vie experimentale’, a way of life, of risks and ventures, of essays and of thrusts held together by extraordinary hard and sustained work of mind and body under stress […].” In this regard, Mills lived “with the tempestuousness of a swift runner.” In his peroration, Gerth declared that with Mills’s death, he had lost his “alter ego” (in Mills and Mills 2000, 340). This last observation can be understood as a pious untruth, albeit one appropriate to the occasion. However, it would be difficult to contest Gerth’s sense of how Mills lived.

The Essays: Writing with Mills in Mind

The essays that follow address the major issues and arguments that became definitive for Mills’s thinking, the work that spanned the period from White Collar to The Cultural Apparatus, an unfinished project on which he was engaged at the end of his life. These are the writings responsible for his place in the pantheon of US sociologists and the basis for his reputation as the most important US public intellectual of his day – the most uncompromising and
widely read postwar critic of the US social order. As he was completing the manuscript of *White Collar* and circulating parts of it for comment, he wrote William Miller, one of the recipients: “I consider criticism the high act of friendship and take it seriously altho not personally” (in Mills and Mills 2000, 145). On occasion, Mills was able to act on this principle, although there were episodes when he took criticism both seriously and personally. Perhaps the most telling case of the latter sort of incident was his response to the review of *White Collar* by Macdonald, which was intemperate in the extreme and in some respects barely intelligible. Mills answered not in print but in a “Dear Old Pal” letter to Macdonald. At least on the surface, it was largely unperturbed and full of expressions of bonhomie and a desire to profit from objections. Mills asked Macdonald to spell out his view of the weaknesses of the book, the errors Mills should avoid and how he might learn to do so (in Mills and Mills, 2000, 164).

However, as hostile reviews of *The Power Elite* began to appear, Mills complained bitterly that unfriendly critics had ignored main lines of his inquiry. Instead they engaged in self-indulgent polemics and ad hominem accusations, constructing straw men and introducing assumptions that loaded the dice against him. Mills expected from colleagues criticism of a quality that he demanded from himself. Criticism should teach and at the same time satisfy a criterion of reflexivity: as a point of intellectual integrity and connoisseurship, the conclusions reached by a critic hold weight only if the arguments in which they are articulated can withstand the same objections. The essays in this volume represent an effort to follow the path of analysis and reflexive critique that Mills advocated. We attempt to read Mills as he expected to be understood – heeding his intentions, elucidating his positions and assessing their promise as well as their limits – holding him to his own standards and considering how well he met them. In this respect, the book is conceived in a Millsian spirit.

In the main, the essays take up aspects and implications of Mills’s thinking that have been underplayed or neglected in the literature on his writings. Several essays enter territory that the Mills scholarship has left unexplored and raise questions on which silence has reigned. Configuring the book in this fashion is intended as a promising way to encourage fresh thinking on Mills’s work and its bearing on contemporary social science. A few remarks on the essays may be in order.

In his stratification trilogy – *The New Men of Power, White Collar,* and *The Power Elite* – Mills’s aim was to develop a comprehensive analysis of US society. However, Mills scholars have noted stunning omissions, most obviously the absence of any account of the place of religion and race in the United States. William Rose considers another puzzling lapse: Mills apparently had
nothing to say about law, legal institutions, the US legal system or even the legal profession. Was this an egregious oversight, or did Mills translate an engagement with law into his larger analyses of class and power? In either case, important consequences follow for an assessment of his views on the increasing concentration of power, a politics of truth and the possibilities of radical social change.

Although economic arguments were critical to Mills’s work on stratification, the Mills literature has generally ignored his economic reasoning. In comparing the economic conditions and life chances of the old and the new middle classes, he constructed a trade-off between perceptions of independence and stability. The dimensions of the lives of salaried white-collar workers, the new middle class, were determined by big business, the state and unions. These circumstances led to a great sacrifice in the freedom and security enjoyed by small-scale entrepreneurs, small business owners and farmers, the old middle class. By targeting Mills’s economic history and analysis of the agrarian old middle class, Nahid Aslanbeigui and I argue that this position is vulnerable to several economic objections, placing in doubt his interpretation of the decisive differences between the old and the new middle classes.

As noted, Mills did not conceive US entry into the war against Nazi Germany as a crusade in Europe, indispensable to save Western civilization from German fascism. Beginning in the early 1940s, when he formed close ties with New York intellectuals on the Left, he saw the US war effort as a dangerous threat to the integrity of a democratic political order, causing a proliferation of wartime bureaucracies that would prove to be durable. As World War II ended and the Cold War began and intensified, Mills’s conception of the postwar militarization of US society became more strident and theoretically more systematic. Andrew Grossman analyzes Mills’s case for the militarization of the United States by exploring the development and dynamics of the national security state in the 1940s and 1950s.

Mills’s concept of a power elite emerged at a distinctive stage in the development of world capitalism: in the aftermath of World War II, when US international hegemony was consolidated and its foreign policy became increasingly militarized. Michele Naples explores the tacit Millsian economics of elite power by examining the economic setting of his leading assumptions and their implications. On the one hand, his historiography of the concentration of economic power seems naïve in juxtaposing the world of modern corporations to a “recent” precorporate past, ignoring late nineteenth-century antitrust movements and mass unemployment. On the other hand, he anticipated important developments such as the mechanization of white-collar work and the associated increase in managerial-to-nonsupervisory worker ratios.
By 1950, Mills had concluded that the leading political and economic institutions of the United States were morally bankrupt. In his diagnosis, the chief ethical problem of his time was a tightly coupled system of corporate, political and military power denuded of ideals and operating on a principle of “organized irresponsibility.” Mills called this regime “the higher immorality.” Ethical considerations were eliminated from the polity and the economy, and moral character disappeared, replaced by personal relations as a commodity on the “personality market,” where success was the sole desideratum. In my essay on Mills as a sociologist of ethics, I pursue two lines of analysis: an elucidation of Mills’s concept of the higher immorality and the question of whether his position can be validated on his own premises.

In a striking admission at the beginning of *Listen, Yankee* (1960), Mills declared that he had taken no notice of Cuba’s revolutionary movement before his trips to Rio de Janeiro in 1959 and to Mexico in 1960. The hastily written book, based on a visit to Cuba in August 1960, was an instant international success. Mills took up the habit of signing private letters “com un abrazo revolutionario,” and in his eyes *Listen, Yankee* became a pivotal book in the development of his political consciousness. Verónica Montecinos considers Mills’s brief engagement with Latin America by examining two of its facets: his nascent cosmopolitanism in the context of his theoretical and political choices and the political and academic climate in Latin America during the late 1950s and early 1960s – a period when debates on modernity and development raged in the newly institutionalized social sciences as well as reformist and radical political circles.

The reception of Mills’s work by feminist social scientists has hardly been marked by unqualified enthusiasm. Like many thinkers of his generation, he was largely blind to issues of gender, and at some points his writings were clearly sexist. However, these considerations are not distinctive to his work, nor have they been sufficient to constitute a ban by feminist thinkers on selective appropriation of many other dead, white, male sociologists. Stevi Jackson argues that Mills’s work holds unexplored possibilities for feminist thought. This holds true especially for his idea of a sociological imagination, which exhibits a pronounced elective affinity for a feminist imagination in transforming personal troubles into public issues and connecting biography to history and social structure. The same claim can be made for his concept of vocabularies of motive. By revisiting the development of her own research, she applies Mills’s analytical framework to one of the most persistent and intractable problems facing women throughout the world – sexual violence.

Mills was not a careful expositor of his own conceptual apparatus. In most of his major works, the theoretical components are analyzed in an ad hoc fashion and apparently in some haste. Explanations lie close at hand. After
his early essays, he worked chiefly on large-scale social problems. Skeptical
of methodological work pursued for its own sake, he was perhaps inclined
to neglect it unduly. This holds true for the book in which conceptual
sophistication would seem to be of paramount consideration: *The Sociological
Imagination*. In their essay on Mills’s philosophy of science and his conception
of the sociological classics, Gerhard Wagner and Kai Müller take up Mills’s
concept of the postmodern period or the “Fourth Epoch.” In doing so,
they spell out an alternative program for conceptualizing the sociological
imagination and reconstructing the sociological classics, drawing on work in
the philosophy of science that was current when Mills wrote *The Sociological
Imagination*.

The contemporary salience of Mills’s work on the concentration of
power seems incontestable. In *White Collar* and *The Power Elite*, as well as his
unfinished book *The Cultural Apparatus*, he explored the “master trends” that
he and Gerth had identified in *Character and Social Structure*: the progressive
integration of economic, military and political institutions, the social
psychology of bureaucratization and the consequent decline of liberal social
orders. In surveying shifts in configurations of power and changes in their
key sites, Stanley Aronowitz provides a Millsian reading of some of the main
developments in recent US social history.²

Notes

1 Geary’s intellectual biography provides a careful account of Mills’s writings and the
intentions that formed them, observations on the circumstances under which they were
written and critical remarks on their limitations. As a piece of historical scholarship, it
is the most serious book to date championing the conception of Mills that he worked
so diligently to achieve – the ideal of the radically committed and innovative thinker.
See also the collection of Mills’s letters and autobiographical writings edited by his
daughters, which provides a vivid sense of his inner life: Mills’s changing ambitions,
pursuits, disappointments and antagonisms (Mills and Mills 2000).
2 For suggestions on a variety of matters, thanks to Verónica Montecinos.

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INTRODUCTION


